The Staged Events: Anxiety and Community in the Chester Mystery Cycle

Dongchoon Lee *
Thomas Stone **

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In the year 1575 the once wealthy, still proud city of Chester decided to produce its Whitsuntide plays. There may seem to have been little enough interest in such a decision, as from our secure position four centuries later it would seem the only reasonable thing for a city which has given us one of the great mystery cycles to do. But the Aldermen's vote on "whether the accustomed plaes called the whitson plaes shalbe sett furth & plaied" (*RD* 103)[1], gives the lie to any such tidy response. The vote was in fact only 33 to 12 in favour, a clear majority, perhaps, but nonetheless a rather narrower margin than one would expect for a pastime of such long standing and so

* Professor in Department of English at Taegu University
** Lecturer in Department of Literature at Rochester of Institute of Technology
[1] Throughout this essay, the abbreviation *RD* will be used to indicate *The Chester Volume of the Records of Early English Drama Series.*

innocently pious in its aims (*RD* 104). It becomes apparent, from the events of that year, that this innocence was very much in question. There was even something suspect or dangerous about them. There seems almost a fear of these amusements, whose potency has enabled it to survive, in oddly mutated ways, down through the succeeding centuries. With the city facing the very same decision in 1906, the Mayor addressed the Archaeological and Historical Society in terms laced with prim anxiety. He cautions that:

> a difference of opinion on the plays had shown they might be encountering a course of some difficulty, but Prof. Gollancz [who had read a paper on the cycle] had shown that they might safely go on, feeling that they should do no harm, but that they should do good to many. A great part of the Bible was historical. The people that were spoken of in it were men of like passions to ourselves and why they should not be put on the stage he failed to see. Of course there were many points which must be treated with great care. (Gardiner xii-xiii)

In 1575 there emerges from this unease what may be considered a little drama, itself, about the dramas; a small narrative whose enfolding reveals something of the precarious position the plays held in the waning medieval culture.

Ⅰ. The Historical Background

The story has its beginnings three years previously when an earlier mayor, John Hankey, presided over a similar decision. In 1572 the

town decided to proceed with the plays, and was immediately swarmed in controversy as a result. From the point of view of the surviving records, this is really quite extraordinary. Other than a four year hiatus in their production, there is nothing to indicate that the plays had suddenly become such a sensitive subject. It provoked what we would today term a full-fledged political crisis; the headlines, if they had them, would have been filled with little else. The ecclesiastical officials were anything but pleased with this turn of affairs, and, as the almost gloating tone of the hand recording these actions indicates, all might not have been so well at home, either: “This yeare the Maior would needs haue the playes (commonly called Chester playes) to goe forward, againste ye willes of ye Bishops of Canterbury Yorke & Chester” (*RD* 96-7). As if this triple threat were not enough to worry a mayor, there was evidently dissension among his own ranks to be dealt with. A cryptic entry in the Mayor's List seems ominous in its taciturnity: “The whitson playes were played this yeare/ to the dislike of many” (*RD* 97). In a more emphatic strain, we find it recorded that “the whole playes were playde thoughe manye of the Cittie were sore against the settinge forthe therof” (*RD* 97). It is obviously impossible to determine at this date, if this whole mess were simply a blunder on the council's part a monstrous political gaffe or whether this were the result of something more determined. There does seem to be a certain obstinacy implied by the fact, as the mayor's list faithfully records, that “an Inhibition was sent from the Archbishop to stay them but it came too late” (*RD* 97).

It is not surprising, in light of such an official chastening, that the following three years brought a lull in theatrical activity to the city of

Chester. A dead calm seemed to rest over the city's festive life. There is not only no record of a play appearing at this time, but even the accustomed midsummer revels *seem* in a way muted. Instead of the at times quite lengthy and detailed expenses that the guilds usually recorded for these events, one finds only a few brief, tentative entries as if the hands recording them were apologetic of whatever time or money was spent on such frivolities. The only significant activity that occurred was hardly of an encouraging sort from the theatrical point of view. The guilds began leasing out their now useless carriage houses being the buildings in which the pageant wagons were stored. It would seem that the prognosis for the plays was poor enough that the guilds, in a true businesslike manner, began to search for a more useful purpose for these buildings. The Mercers, as an example, converted theirs into a stable to be rented to a Mr. Morris Williams (*RD* 101).

Such was the less than encouraging state of affairs when the city, under the leadership of John Savage, attempted to reinitiate the plays. Considering the events of the previous three years, it seems surprising that there would actually be 33 votes in favour of this measure, but, having taken time to lick its wounds, Chester threw itself into the business with a will. Particularly long and detailed lists of expense survive in the guild accounts for this year. The expenses are not inconsiderable and are instructive in their variety, offering scholars a glimpse into the preparations standing behind the plays. The smallest details were considered, such as the two pence the Coopers paid "for nealis to neale the hinges" (*RD* 108), or the painters' eight pence for "bred to oure horses when wye rede the banes" (*RD* 106). Items as

various as the painting of costumes or the copying of parts find mention, and, deeply illustrative of the effort these plays required, the Coopers list a disbursement of money on each of three rehearsals (*RD* 108). That these were involved and expensive productions is clear from the unusually ample records of this year, evidence which makes it no surprise to see guilds feuding over financial responsibility in later years.[2]

The city's plans were not long in reaping consequences. Controversy was again to surround Chester, their previous notoriety perhaps dictating the alacrity of official response. Authorities secular and ecclesiastical were heard from this time, both the Archbishop of York and the Earl of Huntington (who was president of the council of the north) sending letters to stop the performance (*RD* 109). The Mayor and his Aldermen were evidently not to be daunted by such gestures, and the plays went on as planned. Savage was not to be as lucky as his predecessor, however. It took five months, but, on October 14 of that year, the consequences of his hardihood caught up with the Mayor. They had just elected a new mayor, and, as Savage was leaving the meeting, "hee was serued by a purseuant," and wasting no time, "the said Sir Iohn Sauage tooke his way towards London, but how his matter sped is not knowne" (*RD* 109). He found himself answering to none other than the Privy Council, before which body his predecessor, Hankey, was a short time later also called for good measure. There resulted from this action a fascinating exchange preserved in the Assembly and Corporation Lease Books. From

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2 See, for an example, *RD*, 493.

London Savage wrote back to his city for some help. He complains to his brethren of the council that "it hathe bene enformed to the privy counsell that i caused the plays late at Chester to be sett forward onley of my self which your selves do knowe the contrary" (*RD* 112). Reminding them that it was a matter agreed to in council, he asks the city to send "a certificate Vnder youre haundes and Seale of your citie," to verify that the plays "were sett forwarde as by the counsell of the citie as for the comen welth of the same whereby their honours may be the better satisfied thereof and hopinge thereby to reduce all suche matters quieth as are risen now against me and mr hankye whom you must make mencyon of in the Certificate" (*RD* 112). The ex-mayor reveals his urgency, and perhaps something of the severity with which he was being dealt, in his closing lines: "I pray you [the certificate] may be sente me with as muche cenvenient speede as is possible" (*RD* 112). The city fathers evidently agreed to both the justness and prudence of this request, and accordingly a handsome resolution was sent off denying that Savage had:

> of his owne power and aucthoritie in the saide tyme he was maior to the great abuse of the same office vnleafullie and by indirect and synistre ways and meanes cause and procure to be plaide wthin the same Citie Certen pagions or plays...for the satisfying of his owne singuler will luste and pleasure to the great coste and Charges losse and harme of the Citizens. (*RD* 115)

Their Lordships on the Privy council appear to have been satisfied with this, for their is no record of either mayor being punished, and

the resilient Savage turns up in the State Papers as again conducting public business in November of 1577 (Lumiansky 193). It seems in addition to have been enough for the city. Another such venture was never again attempted, and a once popular civic pageant was relegated to the pages of antiquarians' histories with the partial exception of the single shepherd's play, which was performed once, in 1577, for the benefit of that great patron of the theater, Lord Strange (*RD* 124-5).

This small incident is remarkable in dramatically realizing the contentious ground the play inhabited in the life of the culture. It seems incredible that a collection of simple, relatively straightforward plays would prove concern enough to demand the Archbishop's attention and could tax the Privy Council's time. While not unmarked by occasional bawdry, the plays are essentially devotional pieces, confirming the culture's deepest beliefs and honoring its solemnest feasts. It seems roughly analogous to having the president call a special cabinet meeting to “deal with” a particularly patriotic school play. But as remarkable as the fervor they raised, is surely the tenacity with which the good citizens of Chester clung to these plays. Having already been warned by the events of one year, they yet decided to proceed with their pageants, and that in defiance of an official injunction newly received. That events escalated to the height of national politics, we may probably credit to the uniquely tempestuous time in which these things occurred. The sixteenth century was one full of the tumults of change, and in this context the issues raised by two dozen religious plays, became dramatically set off from the dull background of unheeded cultural exchanges. It is a situation that benefits the twentieth-century student, for this little comedy of Chester

forcefully raises the question of why these plays were so disturbing, and why yet, paradoxically, clung to by this offending city.

II. Anti-theatrical Prejudice

To understand the heartfelt opposition to these plays, it is necessary to return to the very roots of medieval civilization. In its formative stages the West developed a moral distaste of the theater descendent from the Romans' own ambivalence towards that institution. Grown from its more purely devotional purposes in Hellenic culture, the Roman theater, as Jonas Barish demonstrates, bore the brunt of official opprobrium even while enjoying the success of popular addiction. Rather like the proverbial status of sex, amateurs were tolerated, but professionals absolutely despised. There resulted a class of professional players, officially outcast and forbidden to join more reputable callings, thereby creating a sub-class of individuals which, banished from better society, became a sort of catch all for “the more ruffianly stratum of the population” (39-41). Or is the comparison with sex gratuitous, for the theaters became associated with the most extreme licentiousness; a fact which contributed to the early church's universal condemnation of the theater (43)? Isidore's vastly influential *Etymologies* recorded for posterity the connection between theaters and prostitution. After the shows were over, he claims, the prostitutes would emerge and work their trade, the ancients having thus established the brothels in order to shame both purveyors and clients of the business (Jones 8-9). Augustine is continually

astounded at the discrepancy between the plays' mythological pretensions and their obscene content. “If these enormities are religious service, what can sacrilege be?” (70) he asks in indignant bewilderment, and in continuing on to answer that question in his *De civitate Dei* he develops the tradition of the theatres essential immorality, creating by the way what was to be an influential trope of the theater as a feast of demons “And these were called dishes or ‘courses,’ as though a banquet were being celebrated at which the unclean demons were regaled with their favorite tidbits” (70). Drama became something to be wary of. It was an immoral indulgence ever threatening to drag its participants into a tangled skein of vices.

The inheritance of this moral revulsion may be caught breaking out in the various nooks and crannies of the Chester records. Upon the whole, with its Whitsun plays and midsummer “watches,” Chester had a relatively active theatrical life, and in this permissive atmosphere it was possible for a few fortunate souls to receive remuneration for their services upon the boards. On occasion the guild accounts will list, amongst all the various expenses, a few pence paid for this or that character, and while this may seem an encouragement for the profession of acting, it is more likely that the recipients of the honorariums were simply local notables who had other work to do just like any body else. The city's hospitality seemed to wane, however, if it were a question of a bona fide professional arriving in town to earn his bread by acting. In 1602 two players by the names of Francis Coffin and Rich Bradshaw made that attempt. A warrant they bore is preserved, dated 1595 and issued by Edward Lord Dudley. The document contains an ominous reference to the last act of Parliament

which declared “that no players should be permitted to play or trauell in the cuntrey in the quality of Playing” (*RD* 177-78). The warrant requests all cities, on the earl's authority, to open their town halls “or other places fitt” for the exercise of their craft, and requests they be given safe passage “without lett molestation or Contradiction” (*RD* 178). The document bears an endorsement upon the back by the mayor of Chester, dated 1602, which firmly denies the players' request to play, and notes that they were admonished “nether to play in this city nor els where opon payne of punishment” (*RD* 178). There is some mention made of rumors to the effect that Dudley had dropped these two, and in this tolerant atmosphere one wasn't about to take chances for an actor. The hostility of the times towards acting emerges even more clearly upon an occasion when some of that detested ilk had actually presumed to perform within the city's hallowed precincts. In the Assembly Book for 1615 we are told of the:

> common Brute and Scandall which this citie hath of late incurred and sustained by admittinge of Stage Plaiers to acte their obscene and vnlawfull Plaies or tragedies in the Comon Hall of the Citie thereby convertinge the same, beinge appointed and ordained for the Iudiciall hearinge and determininge of Criminall offences, and for the solempne meetinge and concourse of this house, into a Stage for Plaiers and a receptcale for idle persons. (*RD* 292)

All of the old animosity towards the “obscene and Vnlawful plaies” raises its head again from across the span of centuries. It is

important to note that, as in the Roman and patristic examples, these are professionals that are being so sententiously dismissed. This may help to explain the longevity of the mystery plays in the face of such sentiments. The pageants were, strictly speaking, amateur productions. The guilds had other and more pressing duties than the making of public amusements. As has been mentioned, small amounts of money are occasionally disbursed for the playing of a character, but there is no indication that these actors are in any way different from their companions, except perhaps in the matter of talent. It is notable that in no case is the money recorded as paid to a specific actor, but simply to the part, as if some particularly difficult roles were regularly endowed so as to tempt otherwise reluctant guild members. The Whitsun plays had another saving grace in their thematic purity. They certainly have their share of earthy humour, but here are none of the libertine revels that so appalled Augustine, but rather the very opposite, God's great plan of salvation enacted out for the "lewde" folks understanding. At the end of their history, though, when the plays had become a disputed point, the memory of Isidore's brothel was not far in the background.

The Plays were not completely safe upon their religious ground either, for there was an attack directed against what might be termed their doctrinal preoccupation. In a society that was being wrenched through the transformation of the Protestant Reformation, the charges that oftenest fell from an adversary's lips were superstition and idolatry. Having grown up in the old church, the plays were marked with her doctrines and associated with her ways, and this was more than sufficient to pronounce their condemnation in the eyes of many. One only had to label them "popish," and the plays stood condemned

without trial. Hence when the unfriendly hand recording the Mayor's List wanted to note Savage's decision to put on the playes, it was phrased with just such an inflammatory rhetoric. “Sir Iohn Sauage caused ye popish plaies of Chester to bee playd” (*RD* 109). When in the year following Chester's last performance, Wakefield was seeking permission to perform their own plays, the Diocesan Court of High Commission gave a decision at York which is steeped in the rhetoric of profanation and superstition. It condemns what it sees as the belittling of God, the profanation of the Sacrament, and “the maunteynaunce of superstition and idolatrie” (Gardiner 78). When Archdeacon Rogers, in his eminently useful *Breviary*, discusses the mystery plays, he can not help falling into the language of offended Protestant piety, as he looks back on those dark times when indecent plays were put on in the streets: “And we haue all cause to power out oure prayers before god that neither wee, nor oure posterities after us. maye neuar see the like Abomination of Desolation, with suche a Clowde of Ignorance to defile with so highe a hand. the moste sacred scriptures of god” (*RD* 252).

The curious thing about the attack on the plays' Romanish bent, is that one can see how avoidable the whole difficulty was. If the offense were simply a matter of Catholic doctrine, that could easily enough have been purged by the civil authorities, who apparently kept a tight reign on the plays anyhow. When the town council decided, in that eventful year of 1575, to allow the plays, it was expressly upon the condition that they be played “with such correction and amendment as shalbe thought convenient by the said maior” (*RD* 104). Nor was Savage one to shy from exercising this sort of authority. The Mayor's

List shows us that not every play made it to the streets: “The whitson playes were plaid at Midsomer, and then but some of them leaueinge others vnplaid which were thought might not be Iustified for the superstition that was in them” (110). Even in the so called early banns, a trace of this scrupulous oversight may be detected at the point where we are reminded that “it is at the libertie and pleasure of the mair with the counsell of his bretheryn,” that a guildis allowed to proceed with any given play (*RD* 33). The Bakers' Last Supper play, perhaps the most dangerous of all in terms of a potential Catholic influence, was quietly dropped one year, and, though we have no way of knowing how the play might have changed when it reappeared, it is notable, as Lawrence Clopper has pointed out, that our only extant copy lays great stress upon “signs, a central concept in the controversy surrounding the Eucharist” (110). Clopper even suggests that the shift of the plays from Corpus Christi Day to Whitsunday in 1521 had specifically Protestant undertones. It was a shift from a Eucharistic, sacramental emphasis to that of the salvific message: “away from the body of Christ [Corpus Christi] an towards the words of Christ the making of the creed, the evangelical teaching in tongues, both of which are associated with Whitsuntide” (111). It seems strange, furthermore, that if the plays are to be regarded as a site of catholic identification, that the first mayor to brave official condemnation in performing them would not bee a closet recusant, but one identified as a particularly sound Protestant. John Hankey, who had brazened the ecclesiastical injunctions in 1572, was declared “safe” by a bishops' report commissioned by the Privy Council which was trying to

determine how loyal the local power holders were in the matter of religion (Gardiner 79-80).

There remains very little reason why, if the objection to the plays were simply out of doctrinal purity, they couldn't have been performed with the perquisite deletions. The pageants were already under the control of an authority structure which apparently thought nothing of policing their content. The fact is, however, the plays were the target of a strongly felt opposition which, in a Protestant nation, was framed in the familiar rhetoric of scarlet whoredom. It does not do any good to suggest that it was all a matter of the government's opposition to a popular form.[3] The relationship of authority to the plays is of considerable importance, and it is a point to which I will return to later. But it also needs to be recognized that the government's opposition was the product of a strengthening and wide-spread sentiment. There can be found in Chester's archives a record of an incident which is suggestive in this regard. In the fall following the plays final production we hear of one Andrew Taylor, who, "vsinge the occupaion of diers," refused to pay his share of 3s 8d for the guild's play. Brought before the mayor, he would seemingly have rather faced jail than pay the fee, for to jail he went, and there remained until bailed out by two other gentlemen of the city (*RD* 111-12). Lumiansky and Mills have found seven other examples of similar incidents in the smiths' and painters' accounts (193). It is undoubtedly impossible to know what exactly had motivated an errant guildsman over four centuries ago, yet the action has the air of a determined martyr;

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[3] As, for instance, Gardiner maintains in his *Mysteries' End*. Gardiner eloquently develops the image of a zealously Protestant government snuffing out what it considered a threat, but which the populace still loved.

someone who would gladly adopt the notoriety of a shirker before paying a penny in support of ignorance and dark superstition. One is reminded of the conscientious objectors who made headlines in the gulf war by braving prosecution rather than accepting orders overseas. A dark sentiment sat over the land, which even if expressing itself in terms of the age's religious controversy, is yet not wholly explained by it either.

A further hint into what might be motivating this disapproval may be gleamed from the previously referred to verdict of the Court of High Commission. After having earlier asserted that the Wakefield plays contain many things "which tende to the derogation of the Majestie and glorie of God," the verdict solemnly concludes: "no pageant [shall] be used or set furthe wherin the Matye of God the Father, God the Sonne, or God the Holie Ghoste or the administration of either the Sacraments of baptisme or of the Lordes Supper be counterfeyted or represented, or anythinge plaied which tende to the maintenaunce of superstition and idolatrie" (Gardiner 78). The issue of representation was a charged one in the sixteenth century, as is reflected in the growing dialog germinated by the reformation. It stems from a suspicion of outward forms which the Protestant (at least the sort writing pamphlets) would see as empty superstition. It seems significant that when the leading Protestant pamphleteers wanted to attack the gaudy trappings and empty display of the catholic liturgy, they did so by comparing it to the theatre. Mitred bishops became bedizened actors, and the solemn communion is transformed into a tawdry side show more fit to gull the ignorant than to strengthen the sober worshipper (Barish 160-63). But of course to disparage the

church by comparing it to drama is only to recognize the negative connotations of the theater. The question yet remains why drama was so insidious. If the representation of the mass called to mind the representation of actors, what was so particularly repugnant about "counterfeying" on stage?

I think that the answer lies in the double meaning of the word "play." As Kolve at length demonstrates, it was no mere coincidence which linked a word for recreation, such as "play" or "*ludus,*" with the giving of a dramatic presentation. The verb, play, as in our modern usage of playing a part, still had all the force of its associations with games and recreation. Game, in fact, was in common use as a translation for the word *ludus* (when referring to theatricals), and the foreign meaning such a word seems to bring to our modern notion of a play, was then, still an organic part of that concept. As Kolve relates, "In England in the Middle Ages, one could say 'we will play a game of the passion' means what we mean, when we say 'we will stage the passion.' The transition from one to the other is more than a semantic change; it is a change in the history of theater" (14). With reference to Huizinga, he claims that the drama sets up a secondary "play" world within the real world. It is the world of the game which operates upon its own internal rules, and which derives its seriousness from the end of that game (20). Never mind that the point of the game was to "justify the ways of God to man," it was precisely the spirit of frivolity implied by a game that the moralists objected to. The objections to this play are most famously articulated by the early fifteenth Century, "Tretise of Miraclis Pleyinge." This Wycliffite sermon objects to the plays precisely on the grounds of their festive,

game-like nature. The preachers primary argument is that by playing games we mock the things of God, making light for us what was all too heavy for himself: "No man shulde usen in bourde and pleye the miraclis and werkis that Crist so ernystfully wroughte to oure helthe" (29). While we are laughing and gay in our frivolity we forget that Christ was leading a life full of anything but gaiety for our sake: "And therefore it is that seintis myche noten that of Cristis lawying we reden never in holy writt, but of his myche penaunce, teris, and scheding of blod" (36). Besides dishonoring God, he insists that such play is a sinful indulgence of "oure fleyse, of oure lustis, and of oure five wittis" (36). By wasting time in witnessing vain spectacles we are not only guilty of idleness, we have opened the door to further immorality by neglecting the "disciplining of oure fleyssh" and "penaunce of adversite" (36). A dim view is taken of past time generally. In setting to himself the problem of a man asking what a suitable recreation would be after church on the "haliday", the preacher first responds with the cheery news "that yif he hadde verily occupiede him in contemplacioun byforn, neither he wolde aske that question" (45). But perhaps feeling that more of his audience has neglected such contemplation than he would care to admit, he relents in a way to provide an answer: "His recreacioun shulde ben in the werkis of mercy to his neiebore and in diliting him in alle good comunicacion with his neibore, as biforn he dilitid him in God, and in alle othere nedeful werkis that reson and kinde axen" (45). The proper form of leisure is more work, in other words, and shame on you for asking. The plays are therefore in themselves pernicious wasters of time, and by coddling our fleshly natures, they open the door to a waiting nest of

vices. With the help of the ever adaptable vice, we have traveled back to a point not distant from Isidore and Augustine except that instead of late Roman decadence, we are considering didactic Christian drama.

In this concentration on the role of vice, the Wycliffite has a somewhat unexpected ally who bears mentioning. Marianne Briscoe describes *Destructorium Viciorum* by the Oxford cleric Alexander Carpenter was evidently a very popular preachers' aid in the fifteenth-century. The guide is arranged by vice and, under avarice, one finds a schematic of the four types of *ludi*. Theatrical matters appear twice in this arrangement. Under *perverse illusionis* acting emerges in the company of jests, gambling, and dicing. These games are all condemned for inspiring cupidity from which one quickly sinks to "plundering, rape, and perdition" (213). These games are condemned for not only wasting time but for having the ability to corrupt even unwary bystanders (214). Under games of lascivious vanity, theatrical plays find mention together with interludes and "lascivious, vain, voluptuous dancing" (214). In condemning these the old patristic connection between theater and adultery/fornication is trotted out, showing that it still had the power to be put to good use. What makes Carpenter so illuminating is his habit, in an otherwise fairly unoriginal treatise, of manipulating his sources in order to make the Church's teaching on drama appear to be harsher than it necessarily was. That the institutional church did not necessarily condemn all dramatic activity is clear from records which survive showing, for instance, the Dean and Chapter of Chester, buying a "barrell of byre to ye players," or paying for "'ye hyre' of a clothe for ye mansyon ouer ye gates" which is probably their vantage point for the pageant plays (*RD* 96).

Carpenter, however, takes the usual anti-theatrical sources and so broadens their meaning that he creates an impression of a much solider front against the theater than actually existed. He expands carefully modulated warnings for clerical propriety into universal condemnations, credits with great weight what were known to be canons of doubtful attribution, and studiously avoiding all that restricts or mitigates in his original sources, even expanding the definitions of the *ludi* from which he worked (216-18). It seems strange that Carpenter, who as a clergyman working within the tradition of the church, is not at all in the position of the Wycliffite, should be taking such pains to condemn the drama. The Wycliffite could care less about the fathers; his purpose is to oppose and correct the tradition not to use it. His *Tretise* cites no authority but the word of God, and makes no appeals except his auditors' consciences. Carpenter draws on the church's rich and complex tradition, but only to find a clean and simple verdict. Briscoe points out how few sources we actually have for determining attitudes toward the drama, the most important of which is surely the Wycliffite's *Tretise* (212). It raises the question of whether there might not have been some undercurrent of feeling against theatricals in the fifteenth-century which was eventually fuel the horror of 'representation' in the sixteenth. By dismissing the game of a mystery drama as so much "bourde and pleye," it is disqualified as a devotional tool. Being but a jest it mocks the solemn themes it presents, and hence its representations of the divine are blasphemous offenses and not devotional pieces. God on the stage is a gold calf, furtively enjoyed, and not a snake in the desert, or even the host in a mast which one would look to for life.

III. Assailed by Church and State

The records bear testimony to a very active social element of these games. More than mere cerebral exercises they were quite distinctly games or *ludi*, boisterous festivities whose exuberance embraced all of the city life, and which may very easily be imagined as a concern for officials both civil and ecclesiastical. The wanton play of the festival was ever threatening to degenerate into simple disorder, and correspondingly, a note of anxiety may be traced in the official pronouncements. The “proclamatcion for the plaies newly made by William Newhall” contains a well known statement on the justification of the plays. It also contains at the end a passage interesting for our purposes that are less commonly remarked:

> Wherefore Maister mair in the kyngez name straitly chargeth & commaundeth that euery person & persons of what estate degre or condicion so euer he or they be resortyng to the said plaiez do vse themselues pecible without makyng eny assault affrey or other disturbans wherby the same playes shalbe disturbed & that no manner person or persons who so euer he or they be do vse or weare any vnlaufull wepons within the precynct of the said Citie duryng the tyme of the said playes [not only opon payn of cursyng by thauctoritie of the said Pope Clement bulles but also] opon payn of enprisonment of their bodiez & makyng fyne to the kyng at amister mairis pleasure god suae the kyng & maistr mair & c. (*RD* 28)

There is an undeniable tone of anxiety in this passage with sheer, simple civil obedience, or rather uncivil disobedience. Echoing these concerns, a document preserving the early banns contains the same admonition almost verbatim (*RD* 33). An incident occurring some years later, in 1619, may serve to illustrate this guarded tone. There was that year a bull baiting at the high cross on the second day of October, and while hardly a mystery play, the baiting was also a part (and evidently guild centered part) of the festive life of the community. As it happened on this particular October day, an argument developed between the butchers and the bakers "aboute there dogges," and the situation quickly turned ugly: "The fell to blows. and in the tumulte of manye people. woulde not be paciffyed" (*RD* 332). In his watchful zeal, the mayor "could not for beare but he in person hym selfe wente out of the pentise. Amongst them to have the peace kepte" (*RD* 332). Having come to this, the miscreants were to discover the extent of their error, for though they "lytill did regard hym," they soon learned that their mayor was not one to be dismissed when sufficiently aroused: "Mr mayor smott freely Amongst them & broke his whyte staffe, and the Cryer tho knowstley brake his mase & soe the brawle ended" (*RD* 332). The flamboyance of this particular event appears to be unique, but other festive occasion in the city were periodically forbidden, with people especially admonished not to congregate, as in 1500 when it was ordered that "no maner person ner persons inhabityng within the said Citie shall not go ner gedder no companayny out of the said citie into the Countrey nother to prest makyng walshe weddynge ner ales" (*RD* 23). There is a consistent strain running throughout the records that reveals an apprehension of

the authorities in simply being able to control their good towns people, and if one considers that virtually every event is accompanied by clearly documented expenditures for large amounts of alcoholic beverages, one might think such fears are not entirely unjustified.

If the secular powers at times had their hands full in keeping order, the ecclesiastical were also apparently concerned with the festivals boisterousness. Without resorting to the sweeping condemnation of the Wycliffites, it was possible to have some reservations about the play in the plays. The worry seems not to be about playing itself being wrong, but an anxiousness lest its excesses detract from the devotional purposes of the drama. A brother of the Friars Minor, William Melton, "a professor of scripture and a most famous preacher of the word of God" (*York* 728), had for instance, observed the York cycle in the early fifteenth-century. The brother declared the cycle to be "good in itself and most laudable," but was troubled by the crowds that came "not only to the play on the same feast, but also greatly to feastings, drunkenness, clamours, gossipings, and other wantonness" (*York* 728). A similarly wary approval may be found in the popular devotional manual *Dives and Pauper*. We are clearly poles apart from the *Tretise* here, as may be seen in answering the question of whether "men mon lefully makyn merthe" on a holiday. The reply is emphatic; "God forbede ellis, for, as Y seyde the halyday is ordeynyd for reste & releuynge bothin of soul & of body" (293). Accordingly, the plays are here spared the cavilings of a senseless opposition, but though the author supports the plays, he is clear that they must remain devotional pieces, not letting the carnival elements to tempt one into sin: "Steraclis, pleyys & dauncis that arn don principaly for deuocioun &

honest merthe [to teche men to loue God the more] & for no rybaudye ne medelyd with no rybaudye [ne lesyngis] arn leful, so that the peple be nout lettyd thereby fro Godys seruyce" (293).

It is apparent that the plays are not the tame spectacles they seem in the videotaped revivals one sees in a classroom. The plays were loud, large, and dissipated games whose purposes were as varied as the variety of people who were involved. As with a dance, it takes a crowd to do one properly. They could at times be rowdy, and were occasionally disapproved. From a theological point of view, one might find that the continual "bourde and pleye" mocked the god it portrayed, or feel that the libertine jubilations worked towards the promotion of vice and the neglect of our higher callings. From the civic perspective, these were expensive and time consuming ventures which tempted the good citizens to insolence if not downright disorder. One could not very well have the mayor breaking his staff every day of the week. From both of these perspectives, the game/play/festival is viewed as a menace. It has a force which seems to defy the order of things, and threatens to undo that which is set. It seems, in fact, a lot like Bakhtin's carnival. Like Kolve's sense of play, Bakhtin's carnival creates its own world operating on its own, independent principles, "a second world and a second life outside officialdom" (6). It is a world based upon laughter; on a mocking at, and overturning of, established orders: "During Carnival time life is subjected only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part" (7). Its self-constructed world is as all consuming as Huizinga's game. Carnival is above all an overturning, a "temporary

liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). According to Bakhtin, this was a folk form endemic to the medieval and Renaissance periods, and if present in the plays goes all long way towards explaining the hostile attitudes it spawned.

A direct affront is sure to raise a defensive reaction. If something seems to threaten the place of God and his church on earth, that church is bound to take a less than kindly view of its challenger. More sobering in the sixteenth-century, the state is no more likely to appreciate its ritual belittlement. It is entirely possible that some hint of rebellion was scented in the festival life of the towns and villages. Governments were perfectly aware of the threat figures on the lines of John Bull or Hans Boheim, the Piper of Niklashausen poised. The idleness of a festival provided them with a readily available audience, and its religious context gave them a rhetorical garb with which they could woo the masses (Rodgers 72). In a paradoxical fashion, this hint of subversion may have provided the city fathers (themselves hierarchical figures) with a motivation for so stubbornly clinging to the plays. Any such festal release would undoubtedly become strongly attached to the popular consciousness, if not appear actually indispensable, but it is possible in addition, that the anti-authoritarian flavour was itself savored and directed towards a higher echelon. The sixteenth-century was a pivotal time for the City of Chester. The City had a proud tradition of economic prosperity and political independence, both of which were decayed or decaying in this time. The century before, the River Dee had begun silting up the harbour,

and had thereby initiated an economic down turn which had continued into the sixteenth-century (Beck 7). As a county palatine with especially cozy relations with the crown, Chester had long enjoyed a measure of independence from the central government so much so, in fact, that it was common to speak of going from the "countrey of Chesire" into the "countrey of England" (Beck 3). The City's relationship with the crown had enabled it to come out on top of a long standing power struggle with the influential and wealthy Abbey of St. Werburg, and as Clopper suggests, the institutional changes that accompanied the cycle's translation to Whitsuntide, have every appearance of a shift from clerical to secular control (106). What would then appear more natural, then that the city would resist the steadily encroaching efficiency of the crown and its all pervasive Privy Council, and that in doing so they would turn to a distinctly popular and anti-authoritarian form.

IV. The Play as Feast

Examination of the plays reveals some justification for any half sensed anxieties. There is a certain odour of rebellion which suffuses through their pages, and calls very much to mind Bakhtin's carnivalesque. One of the most extraordinary of such moments is the feasting scene in the shepherd's play. This is the remarkable moment when the three shepherds sit down to a lovingly detailed feast:

> Lo here, a sheep's head soused in ale,

> and a groin to lay on the green,
> and sour milk. My wife had ordained
> a noble supper, as well is seen. (121-24)

The rhapsody continues for eight more stanzas, reveling in its excess and finally terminating in the mention of drink (155). Feasting is identified by Bakhtin as an important popular-festive form: “The feast was a temporary suspension of the entire official system with all of its prohibitions and hierarchic barriers” (89). The feast lent itself to a variety of banquet images, among whose use religious parody was important (286-91). It is not unlikely that our shepherds' meal could be looked at as a sort of parodic proto-communion, as they share together the sheep's head just prior to witnessing the newly incarnated lamb. It has been suggested that the purchases of food recorded in the guild accounts indicate not only that the shepherds were really eating, but (the quantities seem so large) that they were sharing their fare with the spectators (Mills 125). This is another distinctively carnivalesque touch. As Bakhtin asserts, “carnival does not know footlights,” for carnival “is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people” (7). This glad moment seems to represent all that is both desired and feared in these plays. We must remember that these were great civic occasions in which all the townspeople gathered to participate in a celebration of their community. The black robbed cleric rubbed shoulders with the alewife, and the mayor, with his staff, appeared. Prosperous and scruffy, learned and simple, all turned out to see what were quite definitely their plays. This meant looking on as

friends and neighbors hammed it up, and their respective guilds showed off their latest handiwork. It was a moment of communal identification and affirmation; it was a time for recognizing the bond which made them a people the people of Chester united against any and all who might stand against their proud city. And in the press and din of this transcendent moment, they share a feast. Men and women whose paths never crossed from one year's end to another, and those who wouldn't have dreamed of sitting at table together, all strangely find themselves sharing pig's foot and paunch-clout. It is a marvelous, city-wide gesture which carries either unlooked for hope, or too certain foreboding depending upon one's perspective.

The scene promises an oppositional, disestablishing carnival, and that promise is fulfilled in a playfully subversive current that runs through the plays. The feast is presently interrupted by Trowle, the shepherds' hand who refuses their proffered food and defies them to combat instead:

> And this, sirs, here to solace!
> Hankin. shepherd, shame thee I shall. (264-5)

The combat proves to be a series of impromptu wrestling matches, and as the moment of communion is shattered all three shepherds find themselves rubbing their aches on the ground downed neatly, each one, by their own underling. This restless, half comedic, half defiant energy may be seen erupting in the other plays, mocking the text where it appears. At the end of the “Harrowing of Hell,” for instance, Satan has been imprisoned and prophets and patriarchs are all set free.

In the Wakefield play, it is a moment verging on sublimity as Satan, now bound to his own throne, is left behind forever. In the Chester play, however, the *Te Deum* is no sooner over than something rather odd happens. An Ale-wife suddenly appears on stage, condemned to the narrow circle of hell:

> Sometime I was a taverner,
> a gentle gossip and a tapster,
> of wine and ale a trusty brewer,
> which woe hath me wrought.

She is condemned for selling bad ale, using false measures, and other such like offenses. She dilates upon her sins for a few stanzas, and is presently greeted by Satan and his angles with the utmost glee. They welcome their "dear daughter" and "sweet lady" with every conceivable courtesy. Surely there is a breath of mockery in all this? Especially considering that this play was the charge of the "cokes tapsters & hostelers & innkeepers" (*RD* 32), one suspects that this sudden infusion of homespun immediately after the sublimities of heaven and hell has an other than strictly didactic purpose. The tapster, indeed, seemed a popular subject. After carting off Herod, in the "Massacre of the Innocents," the demon pauses in all his Mephistophelian glory, to address the audience:

> No more shall you trespass. By my lewty,
> that fills their measures falsely
> shall bear this lord company;

they get none other grace. (449-52)

Perhaps there was an inside joke, it would not be the first of such secrets lost to historians. We are treated to another surprising moment through a companion worthy of the ale-wife. In Noah's play, we have the usual battle of the sexes.

NOAH: Good wife, do now as I bid.
NOAH'S WIFE: By Christ, not or I see more need,
though thou stand all day and stare.

Unlike, say the Wakefield play again, Noah's Wife never does enter the ark on her own will, no matter how reluctantly. Noah must send a son to fetch her: “In faith, mother, yet thou shall,/whether thou will or nought” (243-4). And once carted on board, there is no working into eventual cooperation, or at least dialog:

NOAH: Welcome, wife, into this boat.
NOAH'S WIFE: Have thou that for thy note!
and she gives him a blow. (245-6)

We have therein heard the last of Mrs. Noah. It is an image fleeting but notable. She is a woman who maintains her opposition to the end. The only way that she can be overcome by the hierarchical structure is through sheer, brutal coercion. This is not to make overmuch out of what was probably intended as merely a comic interlude within the larger drama of God's revelation and redemption. But that is really just

the point the way comedy may be used in all its ambivalent sharpness. It is reminiscent of that other serio-comic woman, Herod's nurse. In the Massacre play, when the soldiers carry out their fatal commission, they are the recipients of an honorable share of abuse:

> Whom callest thou "quean," scabbed bitch?
> Thy dame, thou dastard, was never such?
> She Burned a kiln, each stitch—
> yet did I never none. (297-300)

Abusive speech is one of the festive forms identified by Bakhtin, though it does the women little enough good. All except the nurse, that is, who is able to transmit some of the spiteful poison back to its source by informing Herod of his own son's death at his own soldiers' hands:

> Fie, whore, fie! God give thee pine!
> Why dist thou not say that child was mine?
> But it is vengeance, as drink I wine,
> and that is now well seen. (397-400)

She acts as the forerunner of God's vengeance as first she crushes the tyrant with her horrible news, and is then followed by the devil who sweeps him away.

But this is representing the play by stabs and slivers. There is a larger, over-arching theme at once more joyous and solemn. The carnivalesque is there and makes its presence felt, but it is subsumed

by something larger. There is no better place to demonstrate this than the shepherds' play we began with. The truly remarkable fact about that raucous shepherds' feast, is that it finds its fulfillment in one so much greater a scant few pages later. Peter Travis points out that scholarship has increasingly recognized that for medievals the Nativity was that historical event most bound up with the worship of the Blessed Sacrament (121). God has become man, and that changes everything. The natural order is transfigured and redeemed by its contact with the divine. When the shepherds have at last reached the Christ Child, not only are they all in harmony in again, but they meekly defer to one another on the question of precedent:

> 3rd SHEPHERD: Let us do him homage.
> 1st SHEPHERD: Who shall go first? The page?
> 2nd SHEPHERD: Nay, ye be father in age,
> therefore ye must first offer. (558-61)

The first meekly offers that the last should go first, and the others as humbly insist on his precedence. The rightful head of society takes his place without either pride on his part, or rebellion on the part of the others. As if to drive the point home, there mysteriously appear the four boys, who then follow their elders in offering their homage. It is a sort of Arcadian pseudo-Dionysian hierarchy. Each order is in its proper place, and each is turned toward the author and source of all.

This may seem a structure made to order for the authorities. “Love God, honor the king,” the apostle admonishes. By redeeming the natural order, God has also justified it. One serves in meekness and

submission, serving God through the master. But by redeeming the natural order, God has also destabilized it. This redemption involves, in Travis' terminology, a transition from *societas* to *communitas*, that is, from the everyday world we experience with all of its disparities and exactions, to a whole comprised of "concrete idiosyncratic individuals, who, though differing in physical and mental endowment, are nevertheless regarded as equal in terms of shared humanity" (117). Couched in the language of the New Testament, one could call this state fellowship. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us" (I *John* 1:3). It is the word for that society formed from the act of redemption; a disparate mass of individuals who become on under the aegis of something new, something larger than all. Thus Travis is right, "the general image of mankind in the Chester 'nativity' is remarkably egalitarian and catholic" (115), and yet he is misleading also for all are equal only in relation to that point which holds the fellowship together, amongst ourselves we exist in sanctioned hierarchies. Sanctioned, again, and yet not vindicated. When Mary and Joseph lead their Child into Egypt, the idols along their path bow before the infant Christ, just as in the York "Pilate" the soldiers' standards must necessarily drop in salute. The message is clear that there is one king, who rules over all, and you who bear a crown but are also servants, another member of the fellowship. You may appear to have authority over your fellow humans, but it is purely derivative, and even for that mere appearance one is always accountable. If one were tempted to forget this, there are enough Herods and Pharaohs in the plays to remind a ruler; you too must submit as one of the fellowship of the saints. Governments are

never very comfortable with this sort of talk when it is in earnest. No one likes to be reminded of limitations, and this scheme seems to justify, in the name of higher authority, a circumventing or a reducing of a crown's authority. The revolutionary among us are no happier with this sort of language, because it smacks of concession and collaboration; it is an offering of fine sounding phrases while conditions here and now remain the same. It is, in short, a world view potentially dangerous to all; an unstable, unattainable ideal that teases and taunts but offers no help. None, that is, except what the baby in the straw has to offer, and that is what all the celebration is about, and that is what makes all so uneasy.

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Abstract

The Staged Events: Anxiety and Community in the Chester Mystery Cycle

Dongchoon Lee & Thomas Stone

In 1575 the still powerful city of Chester decided to produce its Whitsuntide plays. They had been put on three years earlier, and the occasion had resulted in a storm of ecclesiastical protest. The 1575 production was to prove even more controversial, for the repercussions were felt all the way up to the crown, and the mayor found himself having to answer to no less exalted authority than the privy council. They were a source of great uneasiness, and the loftiest powers of church and state are quick to denounce their appearance. On the other hand, they apparently somehow represent a gesture of local autonomy as well. Local pride, and the thrill of self assertion seemed to steel the town fathers (at least temporarily) against the full wrath of the government. So there was evidently something frightening in the aspect of these plays, even as they served as some sort of affirmation of self-determination. The anxiety they produce can be seen as an extension of what Jonas Barish so persuasively described as the anti-theatrical prejudice of the west. From late classical times, the theater became identified with the obscene and licentious, and for patristic thinkers such entertainments were sullied by an association with the idolatries of paganism. With such a pedigree, the lords spiritual and

temporal thought that the plays are not merely dramatic presentations and that they also drive the whole community in riotous festivities.

In addition, these plays present a paradox: the anarchic dissipation of the festival in tension with their affirmation of the local community. The play was itself the occasion of a feast for the community even as it portrayed a feast in the guise of its dramatic action. This can be taken as a defining moment that helps us to understand how these plays could be both a tumultuous feast for the body and a solemn feast for the soul. On the other hand, the plays enabled the disparate group of nervous performers and unruly spectators to be transformed into something like a congregation. The plays helped the members of the community to become one body and to form a living fellowship that can contain the competing strands and various tensions of the city. Moreover, like Bakhtinian carnival, the plays provided the members of the city with a world in which the first shall be last and the wise can be foolish and in which the leader is called to serve. We would be rash to dismiss this all as hypocrisy and illusion, however, for a real community invested the time and energy into this project. Carnivalesque elements or gestures in the plays, in a sense, served as a strong testament to the solidity of this fellowship against the encroaching control of the government. In a time when the political and economic influence of the city was waning, the members of Chester perhaps found both spiritual solace and civic pride in the plays.

Key Words: Chester Plays, theatrical prejudices, *The Chester Volume of the Records of Early English Drama Series*, Bakhtinian carnival, nativity plays